

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

MINISTRY FAIR SUNDAY

Serving - On Purpose

(1 Corinthians 12:14-26)

Introduction: A happy shovel...

A shovel is never happier than when it's digging a hole. Glue loves to bind stuff together. A hammer is thrilled when it's hammering.

Tools find fulfillment in doing what they were made to do. They are fulfilling their purpose when they do what they were made to do.

All of us are made to lead lives of purpose. Just like a shovel or a hammer. Your purpose isn't to pound nails. So, what is your purpose?

Lots of books and podcasts, sermons and TED talks address the theme of purpose. It's an important theme. But, if we're being perfectly honest, this whole idea of "purpose" comes with a catch.

Think about the things you keep in your home. Every item has a purpose. If it didn't have a purpose, you wouldn't keep it.

Shovels and vacuum cleaners and toilet plungers and fly swatters all have purposes.

And everything that has a purpose is a means to an end.

We don't keep a shovel around just because we want to have a shovel. We keep the shovel because it works better than anything else when we need to dig a hole.

That is its purpose. It is a means to an end.

And if I've found my purpose in life, that means that I have said "Yes!" to being the means to some end. I am not the end for which I exist. I am not the point.

If I want purpose, I will agree to be the means to an end that is greater than I am.

A company doesn't exist for itself. Its *purpose* is outside of itself. Its purpose is to supply its customers with what they want to buy. A school doesn't exist for itself. Its *purpose* is to educate its students.

This is true across the board for all organizations and for all people.

And if you or I get that wrong, if I buy into the lie that my life's purpose is all about me, and devote myself solely to myself, at the end, all I'll have to show for myself is myself. Same for you.

But, if we devote ourselves to something greater than ourselves, our lives have purpose, and we find fulfillment.

Today, we'll consider the "purpose" question as the Apostle Paul addresses it in 1 Corinthians 12.

The main theme of 1 Corinthians 12 is the church, or what Paul calls "*the body of Christ*" - and how the church works.

Spoiler alert: It works when everyone in the church serves as a means to God's great ends.

God invites us to do for Him what He could do by Himself, instantly and perfectly. God could do everything that needs to be done in the universe. But He doesn't. He delights to use us in His service.¹

So, He invites us who believe in Jesus to serve Him by sharing the Gospel, making disciples, meeting needs in Jesus' Name, praying, giving, and loving as Jesus loved.

Serving Jesus is what we were made for and it's what we were saved for.

Serving Him is the most fulfilling way to spend an hour out of any day and it's the most fulfilling way to spend a life. Jesus calls all of us who believe in Him to the high calling of a life of serving Him.

Remember. God adopts us into His family as His children, giving us eternal life when we believe in Jesus AT NO COST to us. Why? Because Jesus paid it all.

But we enter an abundant life with Jesus, here and now, when we actively choose to serve Him. Serving Him is where abundance comes from.

This is His plan and vision for you. And it is His plan and vision for our church that we would be a "body" of people who serve Jesus, together.

And if we increasingly become a Jesus-serving church, it will be because we have each learned to see ourselves as parts of the body of Christ, and together, as being the body of Christ.

Listen as Paul paints a picture of the church as a diverse unity.

The Beauty of a Diversified Unity (12:14-19)

"I Am a Necessary Part of the Body of Christ" (vv. 14-17)

The human body is made up of diverse parts (v. 14)²

[14] For the body is not one part, but many.

Paul wants us to think about the human body. Of course, there are some body parts that get more attention than other body parts.

But a quick glance reminds us that the body has lots of diverse parts, all of which are crucial to the proper functioning of the whole.

This diversity is no accident. It is by God's artful design. Diversity is of the body's very essence.

But there were some Christians in the church at Corinth who believed that the part they played in the church body didn't count for much.

It might have been that they were young, or poor, had a troubled past, or didn't have much to say at public meetings.

Whatever. Paul's heart went out to the Christian who didn't think that he / she had anything to offer Jesus by way of service.

To the person who believes that they have no important function in the church - and that might be you - Paul created a made-up speech and put it in the foot's mouth.

¹ As C. S. Lewis wrote, "[God] seems to do nothing Himself which He can delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye." Studies in Theology.

² Note that the foot does not compare itself with the eye and the ear doesn't compare itself with the hand. Likewise, we are prone to envy those who have similarities to us, rather than those who are patently in a different class.

For example... (vv. 15-16)

Hand and foot (v. 15)

[15] If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.

Nobody would say that the foot is unimportant. The foot is clearly an important part of the human body.

As the son of a podiatrist, I can testify that feet come in very handy. When I was growing up, feet put food on the table and a roof over our heads.

But we can understand how the poor foot might think this way.

The foot is comparing itself to the hand. I've seen some a few very attractive toe rings, but the hand is more often the one with the bling. And people shake hands when they meet. Not feet.

So, the poor foot is depressed because it isn't a hand. Paul assures the foot that it is still a valued part of the body.

The foot is critical if we want to go from place to place, kick a soccer ball, or push down on the brake pedal. Stub a toe and see if it isn't part of your body. (Or ask any of the four people in our church who have recently undergone foot surgery...!)

But, in case the hand and foot story didn't convince us of the importance of each body part, Paul created another speech.

Listen to what the ear says.

Eye and ear (v. 16)

[16] And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.

This is the same argument the foot made. And we get it. People don't usually notice ears. Love sonnets are written about eyes, not ears.

Paul corrects the ear, though. He tells it that just because it isn't an eye, it is still every bit as much a part of the body as the eye.

Ears hear the oncoming car, the song, the voices of loved ones, and the Word of God. No other part of the body can do any of that.

Then, Paul writes the following for every foot and ear out there that might think itself superfluous.

No body part is unnecessary (v. 17)

[17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

A body just doesn't function right without great diversity of parts.

But it all works because the body was designed by God, who knew exactly what He was doing when He put it all together.

"God Has Put Me Where He Wants Me in the Body" (vv. 18-19)

[18] But now God has arranged the parts, each one of them in the body, just as He desired. [19] If they were all one part, where would the body be?

God made kidneys to come in pairs. He made flesh to cover those kidneys. He made a skull to protect the brain and joints to move just so.

In the same way, God designed the church ***"just as He desired."*** He has placed Christians - with their varied and diverse gifts and interests - in the body of Christ ***"just as He desired."***

Paul wrote about ears and feet and hands and eyes because there were some Christians in Corinth who felt insecure about their place in the church. They believed that they didn't have much to offer to the work of Jesus.

And it is possible that there are some of you here today who feel the same way. If so, Paul is writing to you.

This morning we are holding a Ministry Fair in the Welcome Center that highlights ears and eyes and hands and feet.

Over a dozen ministries are on display. Each of these ministries either helps our church function or reaches out to our immediate community.

You'll notice that no one person is involved in all of the ministries.

Each person at a table in the Welcome Center today is involved in a ministry that speaks to their heart and that uses their skillset.

They want to serve in the ministry in which they are serving. And that is the way the body works. Each member serving in their sphere of interest and desire. God works through want to motivation.

Likewise, God has gifted everyone here to serve Jesus. Your contribution to His work won't look exactly the same as anybody else's because God builds each of us to be unique.

There is an old Yiddish proverb that says, *"If I try to be like him, who will be like me?"* Exactly!

God will use your life story, your personality, your relational web, your passions, and that special energizing gifting of the Spirit to enable you to press Jesus into your world.

Some Christians believe that they aren't important to the mission of the body of Christ. Wrong. Each member is important. But that is only half of the problem Paul dealt with in our passage.

There were other Christians in the church who thought that they didn't need the other parts of the church. Paul writes to them, too.

The Power of Serving Jesus Together

"YOU are a Necessary Part of the Church" (vv. 20-21)

The fact of unity (v. 20)

[20] But now there are many parts, but one body.

Yes, DIVERSITY is a beautiful thing. But, just as great a reality as diversity is the power of an inter-dependent UNITY.

Unity implies interdependence (v. 21)

[21] And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again, the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Here, the eye and the head are just being arrogant. Of course, they're important. But they think that they can function without the other members of the body. And that's just foolish.

Arrogant, independent minded body parts and arrogant, independent minded Christians could not be more wrong.

And this is where Paul kills the idea of the Christian "star" and elevates the importance of mutual appreciation.

"You are a Highly Valued Part of the Church" (vv. 22-24a)

[22] On the contrary, it is much truer that the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary [23] and those parts of the body, which we consider less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our less presentable parts become much more presentable, [24] whereas our more presentable parts have no need of it.

Some body parts are not suitable for public display. So, we cover them with clothing. Or God covers them with skin.³

Hidden body parts don't get the acclaim that the "on display" parts do. But that doesn't mean that they are unimportant.

³ Many see Paul referring here to the internal organs and to the sex organs.

In fact, Paul didn't say that the less presentable / weaker parts are *OK*. He says that they are NECESSARY. CRUCIAL. VITAL.

And as it is in the human body, so it is in the body of Christ.

No church only does one thing. The members' different giftings and passions guarantee that every church will do lots of different things. And that's a good thing.

God has blessed us here with people who love to serve children, others who love to lead in worship, and others who love to help the food insecure in our city. We all thank God for all these people!

And those who don't know much about technology or how to lead an ESL class or aren't especially gifted in hospitality thank God for those who do serve in these ways.

So, we all give the gift of appreciation to those who serve in ways we don't or can't. And we all accept the invitation to take initiative to serve in the ways we can.

The ways in which a church can serve Jesus is only limited by the passions and creativity and energy of the church's members.

Many of the ministries you'll see on display in the Welcome Center today came to be because someone had a heart to start them.

Some of the church's ministries are started by and led by the church leadership. But not all; not be a long shot!

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul was hanging out a sign in front of the church that says: "**EMPOWERED!**" You are free to do what is on your heart to do for Jesus.

There is a place for everyone at Jesus' Servants Table.

God put together the body of Christ with as much forethought as He put into the makeup of the human body. And His purpose in both is identical.

Summary: God organized the body / Body with purpose (vv. 24b-26)

[24b] But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that part which lacked, [25] so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. [26] And if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if a part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it.

God's vision in establishing the church was to create a diverse community in which there would be a seamless unity.

God designed the church to be an organic whole in which there was no boasting or envy.

Rather, that there would be mutual appreciation as each member carries out his or her want-to ministry for Jesus.

Just like on any given Sunday morning, our music is provided by vocalists and instrumentalists and by those who mix the sound and by those who run the presentation software.

Nobody's jealous and nobody's boasting. It all works because everybody's contributing what they have to offer.

Or like our Food Pantry.

The one who organizes works with the ones who bring beans and pancake mix who work with the ones who pack the bags who work with the ones who hand them out during the week.

Everybody is important. It's a team thing. It's a *body* thing.

The same thing is true for every cross-cultural missions group you can think of and for every ministry in our church: Multiple people doing diverse jobs carry out the work of Jesus. Together.

There are no ministry nobodies in the church. And we are most like the body of Christ we were created to be when everybody serves and when everybody's contribution is appreciated.

And there's one more thing.

The Church: The 2023 Body of Jesus

The Words and the Works of Jesus

Our Jesus was the most compelling Person who ever lived. The next time you read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you will encounter a Man who was like no other.

- He met needs, often by miracles of healing or by creating needed resources. (like fish and loaves)
- He showed the power of God by other kinds of miracles, proving that He was who He said He was.
- He taught like no one ever had, explaining God and His ways so that every open heart could understand.
- He invited everyone to receive eternal life by believing in Him.
- He taught His followers how to live, love, and serve.

In the four Gospels you will meet a Man of unrivaled courage and character, who spoke truth to power fearlessly. He was a man and more than a man.

When you meet Jesus, you will meet a Man who, while great, lived to serve, while deserving of honor, washed His disciples' feet, and while a king, offered Himself as a sacrifice to bring others to God.

Jesus was the holiest, most loving Person who has ever lived.⁴ And, for the years of His earthly life, this was who Jesus was. These were the things Jesus did, in the flesh, in the body.

Guess what? Jesus is still doing these same sorts of things. Jesus' *body* is still active in the world.

⁴ When describing Jesus to a group of outsiders in the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, the Apostle Peter summarized Jesus' life and ministry with this: ***[Acts 10:38] You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.***

When Paul imagined the church as a human body, he used a brilliant metaphor. But it was more than a metaphor.

Today, not at all metaphorically, but REALLY, the church is the physical presence - the body - of Jesus. The church is the shape of Jesus' body in the world, in 2023.

We listen again to the Apostle Paul.

The Words and the Works of Jesus' Body

From 1 Corinthians 12 (Christ / the church)

[1 Corinthians 12:12] For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

Notice that he doesn't end the verse by saying, "***so also is the church.***" He ends by saying, "***so also is Christ.***"

How significant is the church? The church IS the presence of Jesus Christ in the world today.

We see the same thing at the beginning of the book of Acts.

From Acts 1 (Jesus is continuing what He began)

As Luke starts off this book, he addresses Theophilus, a good friend. Luke was writing to tell Theophilus the whole Christian story.

He wrote in two parts, stating off with the Gospel of Luke and continuing with what we call the book of Acts.

Here's how Luke put it: ***[Acts 1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus*** (referring to the Gospel of Luke), ***about all that Jesus BEGAN*** (my emphasis) ***to do and teach...***

By the word ***began*** Luke is saying that what follows in Acts is about all that Jesus *continued* to do and teach.

The difference is that now, Jesus is doing His work through the agency of His people, who make up the church.

So, what the Lord Jesus did in His physical body before He was crucified, He is continuing to do through the church. Through us.

And when the church has been healthy, this is what the church has done over the last two thousand years:

- Meet human needs, by whatever means are available.
- Teach about God and His ways so that everyone can understand.
- Invite people to receive the gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus.
- Make disciples of all people by teaching followers to take their next step into faith, love, and service.

When we say that we, the church, ARE the body of Christ, what we mean is that we are on mission to do what He did. All of us. Together.

Conclusion:

You are a part of the body of Christ. What part?

The possibilities are as numerous as the parts of your body:

Baby-holder, tech savant, welcomer, missionary, church-planter, small group leader, encourager, teacher, prayer warrior, shepherd of children, landscaper, teen support, singer, Elder or Deacon, English language teacher, evangelist, helping others on the road to recovery - and on and on we could go.

When you serve, you are making yourself a means to the end of someone else's growth. You're making yourself a means to God's good ends.

And that is the path to purpose. Give yourself to serving Jesus and you'll have found the abundant life He offers.